

Serving the underserved...helping marginalized communities develop sustainable programs for life

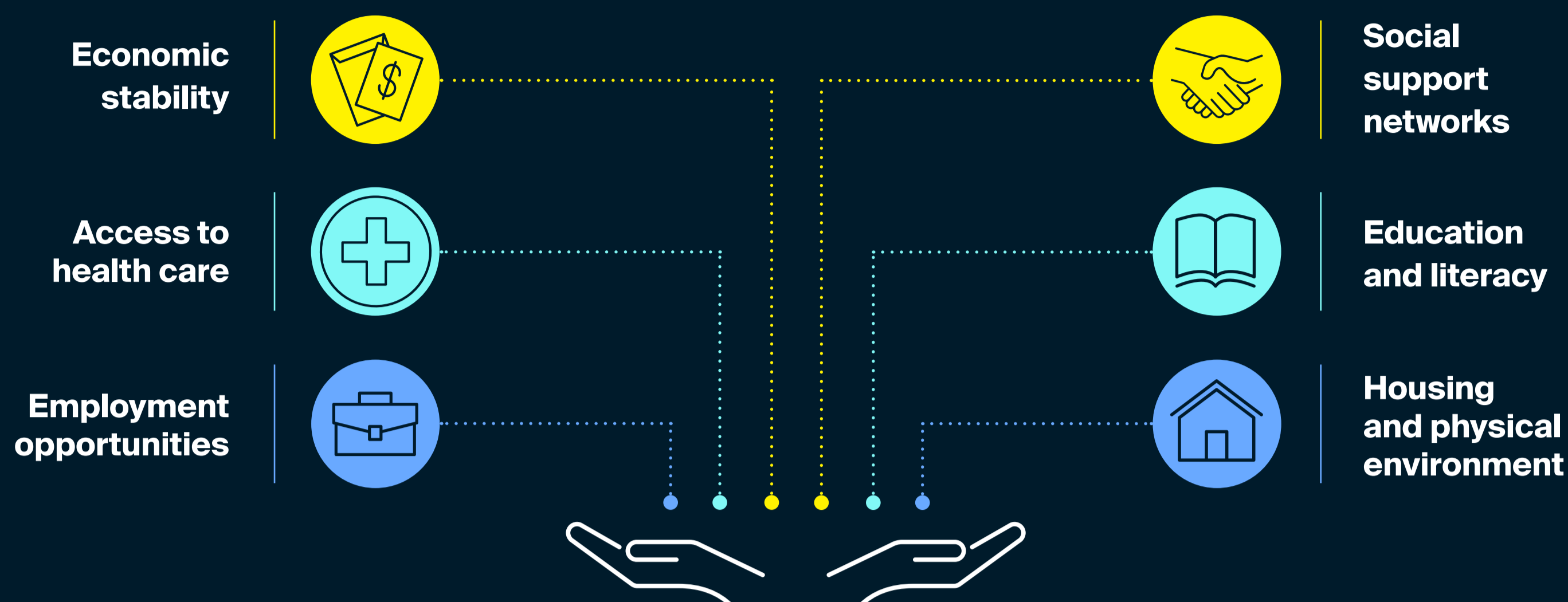


Marissa Miller

Founding Director of Trans Solutions
Trans and civil rights advocate
Lumanity Expert Patient Council

We sat down with Marissa Miller – founding Director of Trans Solutions Research and Resource Center, a comprehensive health and Holistic, community-based organization, and a member of the Lumanity Expert Patient Council – to talk about the challenges facing the Trans, Black and non-binary community. She focusses on the need to improve health equity for these communities but also to pay particular attention to the social determinants of health like housing and employment.

Better healthcare and equity for marginalized communities needs to address the social determinants of health



Q&A



➔ Please introduce yourself and give us a brief history of your organization?

My name is Marissa Miller, I am the Executive Director of Trans Solutions Research and Resource Center located in Indiana and serving the Midwest of the United States. Our programs focus on both youth and adult LGBTQAI populations of color, transgender men and women, non-gender and binary communities, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, those at high risk for HIV, and individuals living with HIV. My goal is to provide leadership in the collaborative, strategic planning, development and implementation of programs that target the health, social justice and equality of marginalized LGBTQ communities.

We run a workforce development center which means we provide community members with opportunities to improve skills and build confidence for career development and to secure employment. In particular, we have wrapped our arms around people living with HIV and people at high risk for HIV. We work in partnership with community-based organizations, AIDS service organizations and federally qualified health centers to ensure that Trans people not only have an opportunity for equitable health care, but that they have every chance of good outcomes in life in general.

➔ What are the biggest challenges your members face?

We need more focus on the social determinants of health, in other words the conditions where people live, learn, work, socialize, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health and quality-of-life issues. Housing and mental health are really important for our community. It's not just about the resources for HIV care; we want to make sure that a person is generally living well and not just living but thriving. We teach people sustainability models versus poverty models; helping them understand bill payments, not just how to pay them, for example. When I say resources, I'm really speaking of housing and employment opportunities.

In Indiana we've incorporated a community level intervention called Vision to partner with a housing program. So we're no longer just housing people, we're housing people with a program. They go through a credit restoration program so they are able to get the credit that substantiates them to get their own house. If they had evictions coming into housing, our dollars allow us to clear up evictions. Our dollars allow us to address any of those barriers that prevented them from getting housing. We're excited to have the opportunity to foster such an innovative new program that really, really focuses on the social determinants of health. Very often we see programs or grants that say they focus on the social determinants of health, but they don't always focus on them intentionally, it's more of a performative, if you will, interaction.

Many Trans and non-binary groups, especially those that are Black and Brown centered, don't always get the opportunities to start with the best infrastructure, or access to a large budget or grants that allow them to build. One of the biggest misconceptions is that funding is making it to Trans and non-binary people through various agencies, and it's just not.

Marissa Miller
Founding Director of Trans Solutions
Trans and civil rights advocate
Lumanity Expert Patient Council



➔ What additional resources do you think are needed?

Our community is a very diverse population and we're regularly marginalized, meaning resources are not as readily available to us. Many Trans and non-binary groups, especially those that are Black and Brown centered, don't always get the opportunities to start with the best infrastructure, or access to a large budget or grants that allow them to build. One of the biggest misconceptions is that funding is making it to Trans and non-binary people through various agencies, and it's just not. One of the things I think would be very helpful, is to create a national, federal body that can be responsible for funding agencies that don't have the financial infrastructure to hold the grants, but definitely are doing the work. We have to find a way to really support our community-based organizations in this process.

➔ How well does the pharmaceutical industry understand the challenges your patients face?

Especially in the area of HIV, I think pharma has done a great job in reaching out to patients and advocates and over the years pharma has taken the opportunity to learn how to take care of Trans and non-binary bodies. I think in the beginning pharma came to the table just like everybody else, with an ideal of what they were doing, with the ideal of how to take care of people. But I think what pharma did versus other industries, is that pharma took notes, pharma listened and intentionally made changes to reach marginalized populations.

I would say, make sure that once you listen, once you hear, once you've taken and extrapolated out the data, that you report back to the community, to the groups and agencies working with the community. We create spaces to gather people and valuable information from diverse populations and we've never had the opportunity to hear or report back.

Marissa Miller
Founding Director of Trans Solutions
Trans and civil rights advocate
Lumanity Expert Patient Council



➔ What can they do to help change the situation and help your organization?

First of all, I would tell pharma thank you for listening, thank you for hearing, thank you for including diverse populations in the conversation, in the narrative. Please keep giving us an invitation to the table to ensure that more marginalized people are involved in the conversations and decision-making. I would say take a chance and fund Trans-led agencies. I would say, make sure that once you listen, once you hear, once you've taken and extrapolated out the data, that you report back to the community, to the groups and agencies working with the community. We create spaces to gather people and valuable information from diverse populations and we've never had the opportunity to hear or report back.

➔ If you could change one thing to benefit your membership and reflect their needs, what would it be?

We've done a great job engaging employers in Indiana to hire Trans and non-binary people or more marginalized communities but there's still just not enough equitable opportunities.

We need more training. It's not just about providing healthcare and housing people, it's not just about giving people resources, but it's about teaching people how to utilize those resources successfully so that they can be as healthy as possible and live sustainably. I think too often we house people, but we don't teach people about living standards and how to keep the house clean and how to pay bills. I think all of us, pharma, agencies and all industries need to understand health and life needs to be more of a learning experience for marginalized communities.

Marissa Miller is the founding Director of Trans Solutions, a consulting firm that seeks to establish community-scientific alliances to ultimately align to public health research with the needs of the transgender community and ensure that the community benefit from research participation. Under her leadership, Trans Solutions has developed a network of 26 community partners across the eastern and southern United States. She is lead organizer for the National Trans Visibility March, serves as a member of the Ryan White HIV Planning Council, the National Association of People with AIDS, and the National Consumer Advisory Board for Janssen Pharmaceuticals, in addition to providing leadership training for the Black Leaders of Color National Training (BLOC). She believes in the power of research to serve as a tool to advocate for the health and well-being of the transgender community.